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THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

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September 11, 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Henry A. Kissinger *HK*

SUBJECT: Conversations with Professor Joseph Starobin of
Glendon College, Toronto - August 12 and September 10

Professor Starobin, a former member of the American Communist Party who was with Xuan Thuy in the jungle in 1953, came to see me in San Clemente on August 12 to tell me that he was going to Paris and would see Xuan Thuy. He had already seen him once in July. He asked if there were anything we wished him to say or do, and gave me a detailed peace plan he had worked out. I told him that the details are not so important as the basic willingness for a settlement, which has been lacking on Hanoi's part. I also told him I was concerned that serious events might happen if there were not movement toward a settlement.

He has now reported to me on his conversation of Sept 1 with Xuan Thuy. A full memorandum of our conversation is attached. I find particularly meaningful his report of Xuan Thuy's hopes for a settlement within one to five months, and his statement that the U. S. should accept the principle of complete withdrawal in this connection. As I had thought, Thuy's statement about our accepting the principle of complete withdrawal in his September 2 press conference seems to have been planned.

My conversation with Starobin makes more significant the statement in the draft troop withdrawal announcement about our acceptance of this principle. It is therefore essential that we make no new offer -- including any offer concerning a cease-fire -- until we see whether they pick this up. (Thuy's reference to another 25,000-man withdrawal shows that this is all they now expect.)

The following other points which Xuan Thuy made are also of interest:

-- Xuan Thuy did not use the word "unconditional" when referring to a U. S. commitment to the "principle of total withdrawal." Thuy called attention to points 2 and 3 of the PRG 10 points, as he did in my conversation with him.

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-- Xuan Thuy's implicit indication of his desire that Starobin report their conversation to me.

-- Thuy's use of a method of argumentation unusual for a Communist -- particularly a Vietnamese Communist -- in saying he was willing to "grant" my desire for peace.

Attachment

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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

DATE: September 10, 1969

PLACE: Mr. Kissinger's Office

PRESENT: Professor Joseph Starobin of Glendon College, Toronto
Mr. Henry A. Kissinger
Mr. William A. K. Lake

BACKGROUND: Professor Starobin is a former member of the American Communist Party who was with Xuan Thuy in the jungle in 1953. He had known Ho before quitting the movement in 1957, but Ho had never answered his letter in 1964 asking for permission to visit Hanoi. He had seen Xuan Thuy in Paris on July 26, and Thuy had given him the traditional Hanoi position. Before returning to Paris again at the end of August, he called on Mr. Kissinger in San Clemente to inform Mr. Kissinger that he hoped to see Xuan Thuy again and would appreciate any suggestions Mr. Kissinger might have about what he might do to further the possibilities of peace. He also wished to show Mr. Kissinger a detailed peace plan he had worked out. Mr. Kissinger had responded as described by Professor Starobin below. END OF BACKGROUND.

Professor Starobin informed Mr. Kissinger that he wrote to Xuan Thuy after arriving in Europe, and saw him on Monday, September 1, from 4:00-7:00 p.m. He had begun by telling Thuy he had seen Mr. Kissinger, and then described Mr. Kissinger's views of the situation. Mr. Kissinger, he had said, believed that the basis for peace lay in understanding what could and could not be done. What was needed was a basic willingness to settle the conflict. Details could then be worked out relatively easily. Professor Starobin had used Mr. Kissinger's phrase about Hanoi's attempts to "break the President" and had stated that if there is no improvement bad developments could occur. He had then told Xuan Thuy of his own impression of the potential effect of the powerful right wing in the U. S. Professor Starobin had emphasized the earnestness of Mr. Kissinger's approach to the problem, and had reiterated his view that the details are secondary to a fundamental understanding that there must be peace. He had reported Mr. Kissinger's statement about submitting the problem to the chances of the political process, and had used the term "five years" in referring to that process. He had also said that while the U. S. wanted peace, it couldn't allow them to reorganize.

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In conveying this, he had tried to put it forward as his own judgment of what Mr. Kissinger had said, and not as a message from Mr. Kissinger.

Professor Starobin found it interesting that while their first meeting in July was very formal, this meeting was much less so and had included some serious debate. Professor Starobin had argued that Hanoi should behave "in a certain way," and Xuan Thuy had argued that U.S. actions have not added credibility to its stated desire for peace. Specifically, Xuan Thuy had referred to U.S. "maximum military pressure" and to the U.S. failure to reduce the number of our B-52 raids despite announcement of a 10 per cent cut. (Mr. Kissinger interjected that the reduction had, in fact, been made.) Noting that he believed it was necessary for Xuan Thuy to make these accusations, Professor Starobin said that Thuy had also attacked the U.S. piecemeal withdrawal, referring to the next withdrawal of another 25,000 men.

Xuan Thuy had, however, said something during the argument which Professor Starobin had not heard a Communist say before: he said something to the effect that "granted Mr. Kissinger wants peace..."

Thuy had evoked Ho, saying that Ho had brought them up to respect collegial leadership. (Professor Starobin thinks Thuy was trying to get across the fact that Ho was then dying, and that his comments should be viewed in that light.)

Professor Starobin had recalled that Emperor Bao Dai had served in Ho's first government. Could not Hanoi proceed in this spirit now? Ho had had great impact on the U.S., but Hanoi shouldn't overestimate this. Rather, they should settle the war.

This general exchange had then brought them, Professor Starobin said, to the essence of the conversation. Xuan Thuy said that the U.S. had been asking for private talks. The North Vietnamese were prepared for private talks with the U.S. and PRG, but pending the problem of the attitude of the PRG, they were prepared for direct private talks only with the U.S. -- on the condition of evidence of the possibility of a rapid settlement within one to five months. For this, the U.S. must accept the principle of complete withdrawal.

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After returning from a short break in the conversation, Xuan Thuy had said that he wished to make his statement clear: the North Vietnamese were proposing three-sided talks but would agree to two-sided talks if there were a rapid evolution of the situation. He then suggested that the U.S. study points two and three of the PRG ten points.

Xuan Thuy had said that they wanted a settlement which could be achieved peacefully, logically and rapidly. If not, the war would go on. These were the two choices.

Professor Starobin had raised the question of a cessation of hostilities (without reference to Mr. Kissinger). Xuan Thuy did not respond particularly.

The question arose of who would organize elections. Xuan Thuy responded that the PRG wants a provisional government including some members of the GVN who are for peace, neutrality and independence.

Xuan Thuy had said that Mr. Kissinger talks of a "five-year political and military plan." Professor Starobin had responded that this was not so. It was not a reference to a military process; it referred only to a political process. Xuan Thuy had then indicated he understood this point.

Professor Starobin had then asked Thuy if he could report their conversation to Mr. Kissinger. Xuan Thuy responded that it was up to Professor Starobin, but in so responding, implied that he should do so. The Professor had then reminded Xuan Thuy that he was not an official messenger and had met Mr. Kissinger for the first time in San Clemente. Xuan Thuy showed great interest in Professor Starobin's itinerary, asking when he would next see Mr. Kissinger. Starobin had replied that it would not be until the middle of the week of September 8. Xuan Thuy seemed to hope Professor Starobin would see Mr. Kissinger at an early date. This had ended their conversation.

In his September 2 press conference, Professor Starobin noted, Xuan Thuy used one of Starobin's phrases in saying that Hanoi is trying to help the U.S. out. He stressed to the press -- as he had with Starobin -- the importance of the U.S.'s accepting the principle

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of complete withdrawal. Professor Starobin believes that Xuan Thuy wished to float this point before Starobin would see Mr. Kissinger, and to put it on the record before Thuy's return to Hanoi. Starobin thinks Thuy wanted it on the record then both to get it to Mr. Kissinger and for Thuy's use in Hanoi. (Thuy, himself, gave the reception at which the press conference took place.) Mr. Kissinger suggested that Thuy might also have wished to give authenticity to what Starobin would report to Mr. Kissinger.

Starobin felt that Xuan Thuy was in a saddened mood, and was disturbed by the situation. "He wants to accomplish something." Thuy had conveyed a sense of urgency and had said that he doesn't want to stay a long time in Paris.

Mr. Kissinger then summed up the points which Professor Starobin felt were significant in the conversation:

-- Thuy displayed an urgent desire for peace, and mentioned a one to five month deadline. He wished confirmation that the U.S. is sincere in its desire for peace.

-- Thuy asked for a U.S. commitment to the principle of total withdrawal as a sign of sincerity. He did not use the word "unconditional" in this connection, and did mention points two and three of the PRG ten points.

-- Thuy said they are interested in private talks with the U.S. These should include the PRG, but they would be willing to talk without them. (Professor Starobin interjected that Thuy had put this forward as a new concession on their part.)

-- Thuy had strongly implied a desire that Professor Starobin soon communicate the conversation to Mr. Kissinger.

-- Thuy had used an unusual method of argumentation for a Communist -- and especially a Vietnamese Communist -- in saying he was willing to "grant" Mr. Kissinger's desire for peace.

-- The death of Ho raised questions -- although not insoluble ones -- about the nature of post-Ho leadership.

Starobin said that this summary was accurate, with the addition of Thuy's indication of flexibility on the composition of a coalition government.

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Mr. Kissinger asked what Professor Starobin intended to do with this information, and expressed the hope that he would keep it to himself. Starobin said that he is a responsible person -- as he had proved to the North Vietnamese when he had handled a message from them to the French in 1953 -- and that he would keep this to himself. (The 1953 message was never released, at the request of the Viet Minh.)

Mr. Kissinger said that Starobin had gotten his report to the place most prepared to do something -- and most prepared philosophically to think constructively -- about it. Professor Starobin said he agreed. Mr. Kissinger said he would like to think about and study it for a few weeks. He had always thought that to understand the negotiations, one must appreciate the fact that they are an accumulation of intangibles. There will not probably be a sudden breakthrough. The North Vietnamese are not a trivial people. One of our problems may be that they are more clever than we, and they may make subtle points which we don't get.

Starobin said he has no plans to go back to Paris. Mr. Kissinger said that he did not want him to now, as he preferred to see what else happens for a few weeks. Starobin agreed, but suggested that he might well go to Hanoi to show the U.S. is serious. Mr. Kissinger said that such a trip now would be premature. (At the end of the conversation, Mr. Kissinger said he didn't mind if Starobin went to Hanoi, but would prefer to think about it. Starobin said that it would be too early to go now; he would give it a week or two.)

Professor Starobin said that he would like to express an opinion: the problem is not that the Chinese are asking Hanoi to continue the fighting. The problem which really concerns Xuan Thuy -- and which is a U.S. responsibility -- is the possibility that the end of the Vietnam war could become part of Sino-American or Soviet-American (or Sino-Soviet) negotiations. Mr. Kissinger said that this is their problem. Starobin replied that it is linked to the possibility of a peaceful, neutral Vietnam. If forced into expressing an opinion, he would argue that the U.S. has the opportunity to accelerate the end of the war as part of its bargaining with Russia and China. The death of Ho makes this possible. He agreed to Mr. Kissinger's request that he write a paper by next week on the meaning of Ho's death and other general considerations involved.

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The Professor agreed that they should stay in general touch. Mr. Kissinger asked that if Professor Starobin had not heard from him in a few months, he get in touch with Mr. Kissinger. He reiterated, however, that he would think about this conversation right away. Before leaving, Starobin said that Xuan Thuy had enjoyed Starobin's description of Mr. Kissinger's view of liberals. When Starobin had quoted Mr. Kissinger as saying that liberals don't understand the human tragedy, the interpreter had understood but Xuan Thuy hadn't.

Starobin mentioned the fact that he was acquainted with the kidnapper of Ambassador Elbrick in Brazil. He agreed with Mr. Kissinger that the kidnappers would not have murdered the Ambassador if their demands were not met. The Brazilian Communist Party, he said, is splitting up like the Italian CP.

As he left, Professor Starobin said that he would inform Xuan Thuy's office that he had seen his friend in the U.S. (i. e., Mr. Kissinger).

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